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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to increase understanding of the mid-life career decision factors of vocational teachers in trade and industrial education. A sample of 179 conditionally licensed occupational teachers in Indiana who had initially been employed in industrial occupations were willing to participate in the study. Four additional criteria were applied to this population: (1) employed in a trade and industrial education subject area; (2) employed within the last six years; (3) between the ages of 30-50; and (4) male. Data were collected from the 35 persons meeting these criteria via a structured interview scheduled at the subjects' home schools. The study found that slightly over 74 percent of the teachers had taught in the industrial environment, usually by mentoring other employees or providing short-term, task-specific training. These experiences helped them assess their interest in teaching. The decision to change jobs fell within three broad categories: economic, idealistic, and personal circumstances. Economic reasons, reported by one-third of the teachers, included retirement, medical factors, layoffs, and income improvement. The idealistic cluster comprised the largest percentage of responses, 46 percent. The responses in this group included the desire to change their lives, the desire to help young people, and the desire to undertake a new challenge. Personal circumstances accounted for approximately one-fourth of the reasons advanced. (KC)

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FACTORS INFLUENCING VOCATIONAL TEACHERS' MID-LIFE CAREER DECISIONS

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Factors Influencing Vocational Teachers' Mid-Life Career Decisions

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Trade and industrial occupational programs require vocational teachers who are occupationally competent. Because of this premise, schools in all states select teachers on the basis of their occupational expertise, often in spite of the possible limitation of little formal education in a teacher education program. This essential approach transitions a substantial number of teachers into the profession from industry.

From the teacher's perspective, the transition from work in skilled occupations to teaching in a public education setting constitutes an important career change. Given the age of most of these teachers, this transition frequently involves what has come to be known as a mid-life career change (Sheehy, 1977; Geller, 1981).

Since the early 1950s, a number of efforts have been made to understand the mid-life change process. Super's (1953) theory of vocational development recognized the mid-years as an important life stage. But, knowledge of this stage of developments expanded substantially in the 1970s as greater attention was directed to understanding the change process

(Sheehy, 1974; Thomas, 1979). During this period researchers addressed diverse questions such as changing values (Fromm, 1968; Chew, 1979), risk taking (Krantz, 1978), satisfaction with jobs (Levinson, 1976), and motivation (Heddesheimer, 1976). Even the social context of work in the nation was changing, which imposed new opportunities and pressures on the individual in the mid-years of life (Thomas, 1979).

Purpose

The study which served as the foundation for this paper (Wittkamper, 1984) was concerned with understanding the mid-life career decision factors of a select population, vocational teachers in Trade and Industrial Education. Clearly, the vocational teaching profession depends on recruiting incumbents with successful experiences in industry. The majority of incumbents make this transition in the mid-years of their life. Therefore, understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of the incumbents was judged to be a logical starting point. This paper will present the findings of the Wittkamper study.

Procedures

The naturalistic inquiry paradigm was selected to address the purpose of the study.

Population. "Conditional certified" teachers in Indiana met the general criteria of the study's concern. That is,

incumbents entering secondary level teaching from industry who do not possess formal preparation in teaching. The incumbents initial career, including formal training, was in a specific industrial occupation. Teaching constituted a substantial change in occupational role, though many technical skills were transferable. A census of school corporations in Indiana indicated 179 conditionally licensed teachers in Indiana (the initial criteria for sampling) were willing to participate in the study.

Sample. Four additional criteria were applied to the teacher population: (a) employed in a trade and industrial education subject area, (b) employed within the last six years, (c) between ages of 30-50, and (d) male. Thirty-five persons (subjects) met these criteria (see Table 1). Since the number was relatively small a census of the population was conducted.

Instrument. The data collection instrument was a structured interview schedule. This interview schedule included

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Variables	N	Range	Mean	SD
Current age	35	30-49	38.9	6.6
Years teaching experience	35	1-6	2.7	1.4
Years of work prior to entering teaching	35	4-30	14.3	8.2

five primary questions with 24 probes. The primary questions served as a topical initiating point of discussion and the probes were designed to draw out additional specific information.

Administration. Interviews were conducted at the home school of the 35 subjects. All interviews were recorded except for special requests by the subjects relative to a unique concern they felt might be "sensitive." The interviews lasted from 20 to 45 minutes with a mean of 30 minutes. Obviously, the information drew upon the subjects' recollection of expectations and circumstances. Clearly, these recollections were prone to the possible altering effects of time and remembered cognitive and affective behaviors. No measure of this phenomenon was possible, so it was assumed the remarks were valid and complete representation of facts for each subject.

Data preparation. Recordings were tanscribed. From the transcription key phrases or sentences were extracted, coded by the subject's number and copied on cards. Separate cards were assigned to each key thought. This process allowed for aggregating and redistributing the key thoughts as the structure for understanding these responses was developed.

Analysis. The key thoughts, in the form of phrases and sentences, were grouped and subsuming categories were developed and defined. Upon the completion of this process a panel of three judges validated the interpretations. Finally, the results were written. The Wittkamper report develops the categories, offers descriptive data with definitions, and

provides a wide array of quotations to help develop, for the reader, a sense of understanding and impact.

Findings

A substantial number of teachers (74.3%) experienced teaching in the industrial environment (see Table 2).

Table 2

Previous Training Experiences in Nonpublic Education Environments

Training Experiences	Frequency	Percent
Not previously involved in training programs	9	25.7
Training was a primary job responsibility	4	11.4
Training was a secondary job responsibility within these specific areas:		
(a) Responsible for new employees: orientations, procedures, skills, etc.	15	42.8
(b) Responsible for existing employees: specific skills within departments	6	17.2
(c) Responsible for apprenticeship training	1	2.9
Total	35	100.0

Usually this experience involved mentoring other employees or providing inhouse short term task specific training. What appears to be a critical factor, however, was the insight the future teachers acquired from this experience. In all cases, they mentioned the positive impact this experience had in

helping them assess their interest in teaching. Thus, the encounter served as a sample or trial experience which later came to influence the major career change. This experience suggested the type of people centered contact and skill sharing role that is fundamental to the occupation of teaching. Later in the decision process this characteristic of teaching would influence the mid-life career decision of many subjects.

Some measure of the impact of this factor was suggested by the substantial portion of subjects who made a career change and only considered teaching (51.4%).

Decision to Change Jobs

The decision to change jobs fell within three broad categories: (a) economic, (b) idealistic, and (c) personal circumstances. The frequency and percent of occurrence for each circumstance and reasons for the decision to change occupations is displayed in Table 3.

The economic circumstance, which affected nearly a third of the decisions, might be viewed as external; that is, the reasons tended to impose a necessity for change on the subjects to a great extent. These reasons prompted a change in career that might not have been necessary except under these external circumstances. However, there is an interesting factor uniting these reasons which may extend beyond the necessity for income. Work is widely regarded as an extremely important factor in determining an individual's self-worth and loss of it is considered potentially traumatic (Clark, 1972). For example, note that two retirees elected to continue working after

separation from their industrial work roles. As one man put it

> "To be quite honest, the wife thought I should go back to work . . . . there was an ad for an electronic instructor, I felt qualified . . . . the whole thing was just super for me being retired from one career and working in another."

Table 3

Circumstances and Responses Influencing Decisions to Leave Industry

Circumstances	Frequency(a)	Percent
Economic circumstances		
Medical reasons	5	13.5
Retirement	2	5.4
Laid off, out of work	2	5.4
Bankrupt, plant closeout	1	2.7
Income improvement	1	2.7
Total	11	29.7
Idealistic circumstances		
Self-improvement, better experience	5	13.5
Just decided to try it, impulse	3	8.1
Taught night classes, postsecondary	3	8.1
Enjoy working with young people	3	8.1
Thought I could do a better job teaching	2	5.4
Teaching was something I always wanted	1	2.7
Total	17	45.9
Personal circumstances		
Needed a change, less pressure	3	8.1
Hours of work, shift, free time	3	8.1
Help out a friend, move home	2	5.4
Prior work with school	1	2.7
Total	9	24.3

(a) Total exceeds 35. Two people stating more than one reason.

The idealistic cluster comprised the largest percentage of responses, 45.9%. The responses in this group imply an introspective understanding of one's needs and values. The reasons seem to be driven by a motivation to be challenged, to try something new, and to work with people. Implicit in these reasons are a restlessness and desire for change. Both of the motivations come from within the individual and were not imposed by one or more external pressures. This rationale appears to be very consistent with Hiestand's observation (1971) "increasing numbers of people were . . . changing . . . after they had met the basic challenge of raising a family . . . they were trying to remold or reshape their lives." Gould (1978) characterizes this stage as "opening up to what's inside." He believes adult consciousness, by the mid-years has developed to a point where the individual is able to turn inward and reexamine him/her self for something other than the "narrow limits" of independence and competency that seemed so important a few years earlier. Note the reflective perspective in the reasons offered by two subjects.

> "I wanted something different; I wanted a challenge; I wanted to better myself."

and

> "It was getting so after I would get the challenge conquered I would lose interest in my job . . . . After I get the job figured out, the job started going down hill for me."

Personal circumstances constituted the final cluster and accounted for approximately one-fourth of the reasons. In many respects, this cluster of responses was very similar to the

second category, but it differs qualitative. There was a greater sense of urgency, even close to desperation. Second, the reasons seemed more specific and less holistic for the individual. Again, the view of two subjects.

"I just got tired of dealing with the public."

and

> " . . . I was working nights . . . and would be for several years . . . 6 to 2 in the morning which is crazy. I wasn't getting to tuck my daughter in at night and this kind of thing."

The motivation to change jobs, offered by the vocational teacher was diverse, but not inconsistent with the growing body of literature which suggests the mid-years are a time of coping more directly with the pressures in one's life and reexamining one's basic values, particularly the values expressed through work.

Decision to Enter Vocational Teaching

Identification of factors which lead the subjects to enter vocational education teaching was a second major line of inquiry. While it was essential to understand the reasons which prompted the subjects to make a decision, it was equally important to understand why they elected to teach from among hundreds of other reasonable transition options.

The sequential framing of the two major concerns (in this paper) may in fact miss lead one's understanding of the decision process. It is much more likely that the "decisions to change" and the "decisions to enter vocational teaching" were part of an interactive process rather than a sequential process. For example, as the subjects looked inward to sort out their

dissatisfactions and discontentments and tentatively discovered reasons for these feelings; it was likely they tested other options (occupations) which might provide the necessary satisfactions.

It is not surprising, therefore, to note that nearly ninety percent (90%) of the subjects identified what Herzberg (1966) titled motivational factors (see Table 4). The responses showed a clear desire to satisfy the subjects' sense of achievement, recognition of accomplishment, challenge, increased

Table 4

Factors and Responses Influencing Decisions to Teach

Factors	Frequency(*)	Percent
Motivation factors		
Enjoy young people, the rewards	15	32.6
Wanted more challenge, was bored	8	17.4
Always wanted to try it	5	10.9
Health	5	10.9
Personal friendships	3	6.5
Job satisfaction	2	4.3
Pass along my skills to others	2	4.3
Seeking more education	1	2.2
Total	41	89.1
Hygiene factors		
Better hours, more free time, working conditions	2	4.3
Job security/income improvement	2	4.3
Tension, stress on the job	1	2.2
Total	5	10.8

(*) Total exceeds 35. Several people stating more than one reason.

responsibility, personal development and contribution towards a goal larger than one's self. Teaching was selected to fill a void in the subjects' lives. Apparently these factors were insufficiently attended to in the subjects' last jobs. These elements are the major rewards of work. Their absence typically doesn't make us dissatisfied with work but when they are present they fulfill an important component of job satisfaction. Anticipated job satisfaction in the new career is key element according to Wyatt (1980).

The importance of these motivational factors are illustrated by the following quotations by three subjects.

> " . . . . It's the satisfaction of helping kids . . . . and getting young people started on their way"

and

> . . . . It had to do with what I felt I could do for kids and what they could do for me . . . . I'm getting rewards that a lot of people don't get"

and

> "The last day of school, all seven seniors stood up, shook my hand, and said 'thank you.' That was worth a year's salary to me"

A small percentage of subjects expressed reasons which reflect the hygiene dimension of the Herzberg theory (1966). Reasons clustered within this area are essential to feeling secure and properly compensated. While an essential aspect of a job, these factors alone do not provide job satisfaction. Thus, for the included subjects, the factors suggested the job attraction of vocational teaching was to compensate for a major limiting factor in their previous jobs. Note the consistency of

this interpretation to two responses.

> "For 25 years I had been used to working six days a week . . . . this job was a nine month job with less pressure."

and

> "I'm not hurting for money now . . . teaching hours are better than hours in a factory"

The consistency of all responses to the notion of job satisfaction is striking. Apparently for the subjects vocational teaching was attractive because of its potential to attend to one's need for job satisfaction. This emphasizes again the important role of work in one's life.

Discussion

The evidence from this study was consistent with the accumulating body of knowledge which notes the complexity of mid-life career decisions. While the study was grounded in a specific occupational area and teaching within that area, several dimensions of the decision process were evident.

First, the old view about "one-life" careers is breaking down. For the subjects in this study, the classic view of choosing one career where deviations from that norm represented nonconformity, instability, or failure was obsolete. Each of the subjects had either dealt with that issue or by-passed it. They had all made a mid-life career decision.

Second, mid-life career decisions can be stimulated by a wide variety of factors. The dominant factor in this study was idealistic or the need to attend to one needs as the new

realizations and opportunities of mid-life become evident. Probably one's reasons for desiring change, discovered through introspective thought, are closely connected to what the subjects wanted from their new careers.

Third, mid-life career decision appears to relate to what Chew (1979) observes as "taking stock of one-self whether the person has or has not attained success." In the case of the subjects of this study, teaching was an extension of their technical knowledge and skill applied to another career field. Levinson (1978) notes that age 30 is a crisis benchmark for many men. The two predominant developmental tasks are to (a) establish a niche as a valued member of society and (b) achieve success. The consistency of Levinson's two goals with the idealistic circumstances of the subjects' need to change jobs and to seek satisfaction through teaching as a measure of success is strikingly evident.

The staffing of vocational education programs, present and future, will depend upon the mid-life career change of thousands of persons. While this study was illuminating about "why adults decide to leave one career for another" and "what the individuals look for in teaching," the real utility of the study depends upon its ability to stimulate new research. The study will have reached one objective if it offers insights to researchers and affects administrators' understanding about why a person might apply for a teaching position. In both cases, the stimulation of further thought and action will be the real measure of the study's outcome.

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